Tehelka□s sting expose: an Inoculum Effect?

This article hypothesises about a theoretical interpretation called Inoculum Effect on the probable impact of such sting operations. C.S.H.N.MURTHY offers some research-based theories.

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The latest *Tehelka□s* sting expose *Operation Kalank,* aired on *Aaj Tak and Headlines Today (Oct 27-28, 2007),* failed to elicit any concerted and aggressive response from the media in the last fortnight. The tepid and lukewarm reaction notwithstanding, the sting raised certain theoretical questions of far reaching consequences from the *media theories* stand point.

The Sevanti Ninan□s curtain-raiser article (Oct 27, 2007) in the Hoot, though welcomed this expose, was the first to raise the question as to the timing of the article□*Why now?* A day later when the full expose was aired on *Aaj Tak* and the *Headlines Today*, the author of this article had taken a sample of 12 days news papers (Oct 27-Nov 7, 2007) comprising □ *The Times of India, The Hindustan Times, The Hindu, The Indian Express, and The Pioneer* --- for a normative evaluation and an analysis of print media response to what one could describe as the most sensational expose since the defence deal expose on this web portal in the last one decade.

Apart from such a normative evaluation, this article hypothesises about a theoretical interpretation called *Inoculum Effect* on the probable impact of such sting operations which might deliver a message exactly opposite to what was intended, to the people who are going to decide the fate of Modi□s government in the next month. At the present the article limits itself to laying down the hypotheses based on the popular perceptions of median analysts but the corroboration of the last hypothesis emerges in the summative evaluation once the fate of Modi□s government in the next elections is decided next month.

The Hypotheses

Actually the article consists of a cluster of hypotheses. There are three hypotheses in all.

H1. The Tehelka□s expose suffered from lack of proper aim, objective, relevance and social depth in terms of media management.

H2. The way the presentation was chosen was not appropriate to a human interest story of this kind, especially it ran against the spirit with which It was done so painstakingly. The overdoses of graphics, commercials, besides theatrical style, all rendered the expose into shot of a horror film than something dealing with harsh reality and bitter truths of the things happened 5 years ago.

H3. The strange unanimity among the different columnists of different news papers expressing apprehensions of possible immunizing effect of the story on the people a short time before elections might lead to an Inoculum Effect.

The print media sample analysis was restricted to the *Editorials* and *Edit-page articles* which usually reflect the mandate of the concerned news paper on such sensitive issues of national importance. The content of the *Editorials* and the *Edit page articles* was examined against a possible agreement among different authors of different news papers on the following: timing, purpose, relevance, similar role of Congress earlier, promoting electoral prospects Modi□s government, way of presentation with graphics, theatrical style and breaks with innumerable commercials. Strangely there is 95% unanimity among the columnists though the newspapers they write are different with different mandates. The methodology adopted is simple qualitative analysis similar to the one followed by Tristan Mattellart□*French Television confronts urban revolts* (Global Media Communication 2(2): 243-250, 2006). Since the sample chosen is very small, study did not go for statistical analysis for the results would not be significant for any meaningful interpretation.

Where as *The Times of India*, *The Hindu* and *The Pioneer* had not written any *Editorials* on this issue, *The Indian Express (Oct 27,2007) and The Hindustan Times* (Nov 3, 2007) had written one *Editorial* each in respective news papers.

However, there were *Edit-page* articles in all the papers with *The Hindustan Times*, among the five news papers, running nearly three *Edit-page* articles including one *Silence of the lambs (Nov 1, 2007)* from the Shoma Chaudhury, Editor, Features, *Tehelka* itself. *The Indian Express* has published two *Edit page* articles; one as part of *TV Review* by Sailaja Bajpai and another by Talveen Singh□*Muslim Problem is About Justice* (Oct 30, 2007).

The *Editorials* of *The Indian Express* (Oct 27, 2007) and *The Hindustan Times (Nov 3, 2007),* however, questioned the purpose of such an expose while the record of the Congress both at the Centre and in the States in the past was no better. In its *Editorial* (Nov 3, 2007), *The Hindustan Times* had questioned the Congress dubious role in the 1984 communal carnage which took the toll of 3000 odd Sikhs in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi□s assassination. The *Editorial* of *The Indian Express*□*Ghosts do not lie-- has* treaded a cautious line while addressing the BJP to accept or own up what had happened at least now.

In fact the Tehelka□s sting operation□*operation kalank*□has not brought out any new. It was a junk both journalistically (P.Eric Louw, The Media and Political Process, 65: 2005) and legally (Sting Operation by Media: Ajay Dash, 2007). Whereas legal escape routes for the story and the characters involved in it were many (*Stung Gujarat Lawyer says he read out* □*Script*□ *Oct 28,2007, The Hindustan Times* -- First Page Anchor Item: Reported by Rathin Das), Shailaja Bajpai, Talveen Singh and Poonam Saxena and Vidya Subrahmaniam pointed out the use of graphics, besides innumerable commercials, to give it a commercial tinge.

Vidya Subramaniam in her article, *The Sting in its social and ethical context* has written that, □Finally, there is the matter of how the sting was presented. The television channels chose the thriller format for a footage that was so graphic in itself that it required no further embellishment. Yet, in the hands of exploitative anchors, the gore and death became voyeuristic melodrama, complete with teaser-trailers that promised more and commercial breaks that stretched on and on-in evident admission that somebody□s misery was somebody□s bottom-line□ (Nov 7, 2007, *The Hindu Edit Page* article).

Even a child in Gujarat, in the post Godhra communal riots, was aware of who

was/were behind the scenes. By the transmission of these revelations five years after the gory incidents took place, the media once again proved the popular opinion obtaining across the country that it lacked a sense of relevance to the society. □Perhaps the sting will make no impact. Perhaps the rebellion against Modi was illusory anyway. Nonetheless, there is getting away from the singular important question the sting has posed; can you separate an investigation, however important, from its social and ethical context?□, noted Vidya Subrahmaniam.(Nov 7,2007, The Hindu *Edit - page* article) in the concluding paragraph of her analysis.

However, it offered enough ammunition for the media experts and mass communicators how such an unthoughtful sting operations deliver the messages exactly opposite its objectives. It was not only a failure of media management but was also a case of *reverse spin doctoring* leading to possible *Inoculum Effect* (P.Eric Louw, 2005).

It was a failure of media management because it failed to perceive and discern whether such large scale communal riots take place for days together without an obvious support from the local leadership and the Government at the helm of affairs. Nagamallika in her doctoral thesis on the □*Coverage of Communal Riots in Hyderabad*□□ (Ph.D Thesis, 2002, University of Hyderabad) had clearly brought out how communal riots were engineered by the successive Congress leaderships to destabilize and pull down the Chief Ministers in Andhra Pradesh.

She, in her elaborate analysis in the □Discourse□ out lined the difference between a spontaneous communal violence, which lasts only a few hours or maximum a day, with the toll being restricted to single digit, and the property destruction to a bare minimum, and an organized communal violence in which hired criminal gangs perpetrate heinous crimes comparable to the level of Gujarat riots 2002. Only communal riots engineered by the political leadership and the government would continue for a number of days taking the toll to hundreds/thousands with millions worth property subjected to worst destruction. This is the characteristic feature of organized violence.

The Communal riots engineered by the politicians, be them from the BJP, MIM or Congress, would have some important objectives like to drive out one community or religious group from a particular area, which is gaining a real-estate value or to expand a religious group base in the area of another religious group or to constantly foment communal hatred for sustained electoral victories. Nagamallika had shown all these three combinations had played their havoc in Hyderabad since 1977 to 1993 in the walled city of Hyderabad.

Obviously the media managers of *Tehelka* failed to understand these implications before planning for such a sting and airing it later. As a result, a reverse of the intended objective has loomed large (Pankaj Vohra, *The Hindustan Times* Oct 29, 2007; Vidya Subrahmaniam. *The Hindu* Nov 7, 2007).

Pankaj Vohra in his *Edit-page* article □*In Modi*□*s best Interests* □ wrote that, □But, in fact, to any perceptible mind, the telecast could be aimed at helping Narendra Modi, who is currently fighting a tough battle within the Sangh Parivar. The sting has helped revive the communal agenda, which was so pronounced during the State Assembly polls in 2002□ (Oct 29, 2007 *The Hindustan Times*). He further went ahead accusing Tehelka for its sting operations which had the potential of igniting communal clashes afresh. □□And if the riots broke out again in Gujarat, it will be difficult for both those who carried out the sting and those airing it to absolve themselves of the responsibility. The continuous screening of past events, and that too on the eve of the Gujarat polls, neither it shows any

journalistic purpose, nor does it help□, opined Pankaj Vohra.

In reply to this, Shoma Chaudhury couldn□t offer any constructive explanation towards media□s social responsibility and relevance to the society in times of need except justifying the sting on the basis the pains it had taken to expose these base realities. What she forgot was that none of the frames shown on TV screen would stand for a legal scrutiny (Ajay Dash: 2007).

Kanchan Gupta in his *Edit □page* article□*Half Truths don□t help Muslims*-- appeared in *The Pioneer* (Oct 28, 2007) expressed his disenchantment with the way the expose was carried out by Tehelka. He said, □Little purpose is served by the □startling revelations□ because they do not add to the bulk of what has been alleged for long. He raised three important questions as to the revelations: timing of revelation, wisdom of reviving communal passions and the ease with which □secularists□ gloss over more horrendous visuals on the TV screen.

Taking one step ahead of all these writers, Kingshuk Nag asked for an immediate dismissal of Modi□s government, in his article, *Polls don□t tell whole story* out of an illusory apprehension that Modi may be voted back to power despite such gory past of his governance (*The Times of India*, Oct 30, 2007 *Edit Page* article). He also demanded a judicial inquiry in the light of these fresh revelations to bring to book the culprits which obviously includes Modi too. But, judging by the same yardstick what should be done to the Congress governments and leaders both in Punjab, Andhra Pradesh and Delhi? There are no answers to questions as to what happened to the Shah Commission reports of 1977-80, the Sri Krishna Commission report of 1999? The Justice Nanavathi commission, which is still dragging its feet on post-Godhra riots, has yet to come to grips with the reality.

For that matter, have inquiry commissions have ever yielded anything tangible for the society to gauge as relief to the victims? Eminent lawyer, K.G. Kannabiran who has analyzed in built flaws in the inquiry commissions thus far constituted in his article *Inquiry Commission - No Substitute* **(**PUCL Bulletin, May 2001) held that □Is the Commission of Inquiry Act a substitute for criminal prosecution? It is not. It is not part of the criminal justice system. Even if a sitting sessions judge is appointed under the Act, the powers wielded by him as a sessions judge will not be available to him. It is a method available to the Government to gather information with regard to a matter of public importance. It does not judge the issue as a court does. A commission of inquiry also cannot be a substitute for investigation under the provisions of the criminal procedure code□□.The obligation to set in motion the criminal justice system on the occurrence of the crime can neither be substituted by any other device nor dispensed with.□

Similar views were echoed in the article of Talveen Singh -- *Muslim problem is about justice □ (Indian Express Edit Page article, Oct 28, 2007).* She too voiced her concern over the ghastly way the riots were carried out and unashamedly admitted before a TV camera. But, at the time, she raised her voice against similar massacres perpetrated by the Congress hooligans at Hasheempura in Meerut in 1987 when seventy Muslims were butchered at one go.

In the ultimate analysis, all the writers of the Edit -page articles of different news papers have expressed similar fears that *Tehelka□s* expose might lead Modi for a third time BJP□s victory in view of the semiotics that the powerful visuals conveyed to the larger population of the State. The near unanimity among different columnists is surprising in this regard.

Firstly, it might consolidate the Hindus, who had hither to disagreed with the ways of Modi and his governance, out of fear of backlash from Muslims if Modi is

defeated? Secondly despite the *Tehelka□s b*est expose, the apparent inaction or failure of any authority to legally book Modi on the basis of expose might portray him as an insurmountable and unquestionable hero, an image which had taken beat since the post-Godhra riots in 2002. Usually the border States of India along the line of Pakistan are communally sensitive and religiously very vibrant. Examples of Rajasthan, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat are enough where BJP and the Congress alternately share power. Hence the people of the State of Gujarat, largely constituting Hindu majority, might opt for a conservative and fundamentalist Modi to Congress which has no matching leader to Modi at the present time to mobilize the powerful business and industrial lobby against him (Modi).

Against the backdrop, the Tehelka□s expose might have served as inoculum for *reverse spin doctoring*, enhancing the electoral prospects of Modi and BJP as well. If the latest CNN-IBN opinion polls were to be believed, the BJP has certainly utilized the Tehelka□s expose for its positive gains due to *inoculum effect. (Modi has clear edge but he isn□t invincible. The Indian Express Nov 16, 2007). Reverse spin-doctoring* can be defined as a media process *which would do unintentional spin-doctoring for a politician whom it wants to hit.* In the given case, *Tehelka* intended to show Modi and his governance as perfectly communal and criminal in its dispensation and thereby deserved to be tried under law, besides being thrown at the ensuing hustings. However, the media and political analysts found it doing exactly opposite, enhancing the prospects of Modi□s return with a big majority due to early immunization done by *Tehelka□s* expose. It may also possibly be called as *Inoculum Effect which will be known only after results begin to surface.*

It was exactly much the same way George Bush got elected second time with thumping majority following telecasting of Osama Bin Laden□s message to Americans to over throw the Bush government in 2004. Eric Louw (2005) sought to explain how the process of spin □ doctoring helped Clinton to overcome the Monica Lewski□s episode while seeking for the second term in the US.

It is open to see once the election results trickle out--whether this normative evaluation, based on media perceptions, as reflected by the columnists in different print media, stands vindicated or not. Such a summative evaluation is very crucial to the hypotheses made in this article as of now.

This apart, media management wise, Vidya Subramanian is right in pointing out that □Tehelka unveiled its latest sting at a time when the phrase was in bad odour from overuse. Too many fake stings had damaged way too many reputations, and it was with some trepidation that viewers approached the latest script, theatrically narrated television style□.

Perhaps, this might serve as an eye opener to all those media managers who plan for such sting operations in future. Sting operations not only require technical supremacy but also need social depth and relevance to the times, besides the clear objectives that it would meet.

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